



File Code: 1950
Date: February 18, 2020

Dear Interested Party:

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) invites your input on the proposed ***Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Facility Improvement Project***. In development and preparation of the project, the participation of interested persons, state and local governments, and Federally recognized Tribes and Alaska Native Corporations is encouraged at this time and throughout the process.

To analyze this proposed action under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), an environmental assessment and draft decision will be completed and made available to those who submit comments and to those who have requested to be included on the project mailing list. (See below for instructions regarding how to comment and be added to the mailing list.) The final environmental analysis and decision is planned to be completed in the fall of 2020. The Responsible Official for this project is the Forest Supervisor, Tongass National Forest.

The project will take place at the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area (MGRA) within the Tongass National Forest. It is located about 12 miles northwest of downtown Juneau in the Mendenhall Valley, Juneau, Alaska.

Why Is This Project Needed?

Providing recreation services and facilities is a key part of the USFS mission, and the MGRA provides recreation experiences that highlight the natural, historic, and cultural resources of Alaska to local, national, and international visitors. The Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center (MGVC) is the most visited attraction in Alaska by summer visitors and is visited by one of every three visitors to the state.

Currently, the number of visitors (700,000 in 2017) far exceeds the MGRA design capacity for 485,000 visitors per year. This has caused congestion, under-capitalized opportunities, and inadequate facilities resulting in a degraded visitor experience.

The number of visitors is expected to continue to increase in coming years, which could lead to further declines in visitor experience or environmental damage if action is not taken to address the recreation infrastructure within the MGRA. Additionally, as the retreating Mendenhall Glacier is changing the landscape, the MGRA and its interpretive and recreational facilities need to adapt to maintain and diversify the visitor experience.

This project is needed in order to continue to provide sustainable recreation experiences that interpret glacial features in a changing environment by meeting current and future visitor demand, accommodating and interpreting the changing landscape for visitors, and protecting the natural environmental and resources that make the MGRA a special place.



The need to improve the MGRA was identified during the Mendenhall Glacier Master Plan process, and several concepts for improvements were outlined in the February 2019 Mendenhall Glacier Master Plan. Those basic concepts have been further refined over the past year, leading to the proposed action of this project.

What Is Being Proposed?

The proposed Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Facility Improvement Project includes the following main elements (Figure 1- Overall Project Siteplan and 2 - Summary of Project Concepts):

- **Glacier Spur Road Trailheads:** Three new Glacier Spur Road trailheads (Dredge Lakes, Crystal Lake, and Power Line) would be added with paved parking, trailhead kiosks, and road corridor and trail signs (Figure 3).
- **Transportation – Expanded Parking & Improved Access:** Parking and access at the MGVC complex would be improved through construction of new paved parking for commercial and passenger vehicles, including pick-up and drop-off areas, passenger waiting shelters, paved accessible cross-walks, sidewalks, pedestrian areas, and new wayfinding signs and interpretive features (Figure 4).
- **Facility – Welcome Center Complex:** The existing pavilion and parking area shelters and kiosks would be removed, and a new Welcome Center facility would be constructed to replace the existing pavilion overlooking the lake. In addition to the proposed Welcome Center building, the complex would include arrival, entry, and departure plazas, a smoking shelter, wayfinding signs, a new maintenance facility, improvements to and extensions of existing trails, and an interpretive plaza, amphitheater and shelters (Figure 5).
- **Facility – Visitor Center Expansion:** The existing Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center would be expanded and renovated and interior spaces would be reconfigured to improve circulation by adding space to the upper public floor, creating additional theater seating capacity, expanding restrooms, and defining a space for theater queuing (Figure 6).
- **Steep Creek – Realignment & Boardwalk:** The Steep Creek trail boardwalk would be improved by realigning and extending the boardwalk and providing additional overlooks, including an overlook with views of Dipper Falls. The Dike Trail between the Trail of Time and Glacier Spur Road would be decommissioned, because it is a man-made feature that is overly close to the proposed Steep Creek Boardwalk and would conflict with the raised grades required for the proposed Steep Creek vehicular bridge. The proposed creek restoration would provide improved salmon habitat through the development of natural channel features including pools, riffles, meanders, and balanced movement of creek substrate. The proposed restoration would also develop an appropriate creek flood plain which may improve movement of bears within the corridor (Figure 7).
- **Steep Creek – Bridge & Underpass:** The area where Steep Creek crosses under Glacier Spur Road would be improved by replacing the two existing perched culverts with a vehicular bridge to improve fish passage and provide a pedestrian and wildlife underpass, and help separate people from wildlife (Figure 8).
- **Steep Creek – Fish Viewing Window:** Steep Creek improvements would include constructing a fish viewing facility: a glass-walled building with a subterranean fish-viewing window, accessible by ramps and stairs (Figure 9).

- **Lakeshore Trail & Bridge:** The Lakeshore Trail would be located in the Dredge Lakes and Mendenhall Campground areas. The trail would extend from the Welcome Center Complex along the south shore of Mendenhall Lake and would include a proposed pedestrian bridge across the Mendenhall River. The trail would have a leg within the Mendenhall Campground terminating at Skaters Cabin Road and would also create a loop trail around the Dredge Lakes area by adding spur trails at three locations to connect currently disconnected segments into a recreational loop. One of the proposed spurs would connect the pedestrian bridge to the existing off-street parking area at the north side of the Mendenhall Loop Road at the east side of the Mendenhall River. A new day-use parking lot is proposed at the Mendenhall Campground and would replace some of the existing walk-in campsites (Figure 10).
- **Docks & Support Facilities:** Three floating docks are proposed: one near the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center with a waiting shelter, one near the glacier with restroom facilities and access to proposed new visitor facilities, and one near Skater's Cabin with a bulkhead and boat launch (Figure 11). The floating docks would be designed to be removed in the winter.
- **Remote Glacier Visitor Facilities:** Remote glacier visitor facilities are proposed as small modular buildings that can be relocated as the Mendenhall Glacier retreats and that connect to the proposed Remote Glacier boat dock via hardened trails (Figure 12).
- **West Glacier Spur Trail:** The West Glacier Spur Trail would connect the proposed Remote Glacier Visitor Facilities to the existing West Glacier Trail and would consist of two segments: one low alignment along the peninsula in Mendenhall Lake, and one upper alignment. The two alignments would form a loop option (Figure 13).

Drainage, grading, removal of outdated infrastructure and materials, vegetation clearing and grubbing, revegetation, and soil and water quality protection would be completed, as needed.

For additional details, visit the project website at www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53780, which will be updated throughout this process as more information becomes available. All referenced figures are available on the project website.

Why Have I Received This Proposal?

The purpose of public scoping is to provide an opportunity for the public to provide meaningful input on a proposed action prior to a decision. Scoping provides an early and open process to identify issues related to a proposed action, determine the scope of issues to be addressed, and provide information for the responsible official to consider. We are asking for specific comments or concerns regarding the proposed project and any supporting reasons for consideration by the Responsible Official. Your comments will help guide development of the environmental assessment and shape the proposed action and possible alternatives.

How Do I Submit Comments?

To submit comments, please email comments-alaska-tongass-juneau@usda.gov and include MGRA NEPA in the subject line. Written comments can also be submitted by facsimile to 907-586-8808, mailed to Juneau Ranger District, Attn: MGRA NEPA, 8510 Mendenhall Loop Road, Juneau, AK 99801, or hand delivered to that office, Monday-Friday between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., except for Federal holidays.

Comments received as part of this process will become part of the public record. Personal identifiable information for individuals, such as address and phone number, will be removed but comments may be posted to the project webpage.

This project is subject to Forest Service regulations at 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B, Project-level Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process. Only individuals or entities who submit timely and specific written comments concerning the project during this or another designated comment period will be eligible to file an objection.

Comments must be received by March 19, 2020. Comments after that date and comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, such commenters will not gain standing to object.

USFS will hold a public open house on Thursday, February 20, 2020, from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. at the existing Mendenhall Visitor Center located on Glacier Spur Road in Juneau, Alaska. Written comments will also be accepted at the open house.

How Does Someone Join the Project Mailing List?

If you would like to update your preferences regarding projects of interest to you or would like to subscribe to updates for the first time:

- Go to <https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDAFS/subscriber/new>.
- Enter your email address and click "Submit."
- Place a check in the box next to each project or category for which you would like to receive updates.

You may choose individual projects, districts, or Forests, or choose categories of projects (such as recreation management). You can log in to update your preferences at any time after signing up for the electronic notifications.

Questions?

If you have questions about the project or would like more information, contact Cathy Tighe, Project Manager, at 907-228-6274. Please join us at the open house.

We are committed to an open, transparent, and inclusive process as we conduct the analysis for this project. Your input is valued and important to a successful outcome. We look forward to your participation in this project.

Sincerely,



M. EARL STEWART
Forest Supervisor, Tongass NF

Attachments (available on the project website at www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53780):

Figure One: Overall Project Siteplan

Figure Two: Summary of Project Concepts (This Has A Thumbnail For Each Concept

Figure Three: Glacier Spur Road Trailheads
Figure Four: Expanded Parking & Improved Access
Figure Five: Welcome Center Complex
Figure Six: Visitor Center Expansion
Figure Seven: Steep Creek Realignment & Boardwalk
Figure Eight: Steep Creek Bridge & Underpass
Figure Nine: Steep Creek Fish Viewing Window
Figure Ten: Lakeshore Trail, Bridge, And Parking Lot
Figure Eleven: Motorized Boat Docks
Figure Twelve: Remote Glacier Visitor Facilities
Figure Thirteen: West Glacier Spur Trail

cc: Brad Orr